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AUTHOR	Kitchens, James A.
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ABSTRACT

From 1974 to 1979, the town of Olney, Texas, operated a single library which combined the functions, but not the collections, of their elementary, junior, and senior high schools, and public libraries. In June of 1979, they dedicated a new building which merged the collections of these libraries. Data for this evaluation and assessment of the functions of the combined library from its inception to the dedication of the new building were collected through 60 personal interviews with library personnel, teachers, students, and community members. Questions focused on problems, successes, day to day operation, budget, funding patterns, and attitudes toward the library. The findings of this study indicate that the combined public/school library in Olney is successful, and it is suggested that other communities of similar size might profitably follow the model developed in Olney. (Author/RAA)

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Evaluation and Assessment of The Olney Community Library

James A. Kitchens
North Texas State University
Denton, Texas

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ABSTRACT

From 1974 to 1979, the town of Olney, Texas operated a single library which combined the functions, but not the collections, of their elementary, junior, senior high schools and public libraries. In June of 1979, they dedicated a new building which merged the collections of these libraries. The purpose of this research was to evaluate and assess the functions of this library from its inception to the dedication of the new building. To accomplish this purpose, sixty personal interviews with library personnel, teachers, students, and community members were conducted. Information was collected on problems, successes, day to day operation, budget, funding patterns, and attitudes toward the library. In sum, the findings of this research is that the combined public/school library in Olney is an excellent success and that other communities of similar size may profitably follow the model developed in Olney.

HISTORY OF THE OLNEY PROJECT

The town of Olney, population approximately 5000, is located forty miles south of Wichita Falls. It is surrounded by rich farm lands on which grow both cattle and grain crops. The community is neat, orderly, and boasts a number of small industries. It is characterized by enormous civic pride and an unusual spirit of cooperation. Unlike many small towns, Olney has managed to attract young families and to grow in population since the early 1960's. Farsighted and community-oriented leadership has helped Olney develop a sound financial basis and to offer a wholesome quality of life to her citizens.

The story of The Olney Community Library and Cultural Arts Center began in 1971 when a group of citizens suggested combining the school and public libraries. This suggestion was part of a community-wide set of plans designed to improve the quality of life for the citizenry of Olney. Not content

simply to improve streets and build another park, the leaders of this community extended their plans to upgrading a number of civic services and someone suggested improving the libraries by merging the school and public libraries. Theyreasoned that such a merger would issue in a number of positive results. With the exception of the junior high library, libraries in the three schools, which are all located on one campus, were admittedly inferior and the public library, located in two rooms in the city hall,was woefully inadequate. Putting all the collections in one place would serve to improve the collection. Beyond that, money which was spent to improve the libraries, upgrade services, and institute new programs could be more efficiently spent by avoiding duplication of materials. Further, the materials of the school libraries would be available to the community in the evenings and during the summer months. In all, the suggestion seemed both simple and advantageous. At this point they wondered why everybody didn't do it. The decision was made to move forward on the plan.

To assist them in planning the merger, they asked the Office of Education for help and for this purpose a three-year research and demonstrations grant was made to North Texas State University, located some 100 miles from Olney. The objective of the grant was to trace the development of the library, recording problems encountered and solutions found, and to assess the feasibility of such an approach to library service. Specific to the guidelines of the grant was that the project staff was to make every effort to let the people in Olney discover their own solutions to the problems that would arise. Ideas for projects and programs were to come from the community, not the project staff. Once decisions were made, experts from library science, architecture, and government could be called in to provide consultation, assist with details, and give necessary information.

A steering committee, made up of the Public Library Board and members of the City Council and the School Board, was established in 1972 for the purpose of setting up the structure and program of the new library. Problems of various magnitude began to appear which involved questions of administration, financing, location, and legality. This committee began to struggle with these and other questions: What qualifications would a librarian directing such a library have to meet? Is it legal in Texas for non-students to use school-owned books and property? How does one mix public and school standards to achieve accreditation? How would summer salaries and operating expenses be financed? Where would the building be located and how would it be financed? What unique architectural features would it need to insure that both school and public patrons would be served adequately? Would adults use a library located on the school campus? What would the library be called? Would it even be a "library"? What kind of board would adequately administer the library and how could both school and city be fairly represented? How could the library be financed and how would the money be handled?

It was decided to handle the merging of the libraries in two phases: First, questions of administration would be resolved and a coordinated program would be developed which would merge the functions of the libraries while leaving the collections in their present locations. During this phase most problems would be encountered and ironed out and a definite program of library services would be instituted. Also, during this time the collections of the libraries could be seriously weeded and improved. This first phase lasted from 1972 to 1976. Second, a new building would be planned to house the program and after its construction the collections would be merged. Planning for the new building began in 1977 and in June of 1979 Olney dedicated the new 9,000 square foot, $450,000 building which completed her dream of a combined school and public library.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

In June of 1979, the Office of Education funded another study on the library to describe and assess the community's progress toward her goals. The purpose of this grant, again under the auspices of North Texas State University, was to ascertain how the library was administered, the problems which it had encountered, how these problems had been resolved, and the community response to the new library. Beyond that, the project was to determine what, if any, advantages and disadvantages such an approach to library service might present. To carry out these objectives sixty persons were interviewed including representatives from the library staff, school faculty, students, community leaders, and community residents. Additionally, minutes of various boards involved and all written documents relevant to the library were examined.

FINDINGS

The library is administered by The Olney Community Library Board which consists of nine members. Three are appointed by the School Board, three by the City Council, one is a School Board member, one a City Council member, and there is a rural representative who must live outside the city but within the school district. This board is autonomous and has complete control of the library. It is incorporated, a legal technicality which required a decision by the state attorney general during the planning phases. The library is run by a Library Coordinator, first appointed in 1972. This person meets the qualifications of both a public and school librarian. Technically, she and the entire library staff are employees of the school which offers them certain fringe benefits such as participation in the teacher retirement system and insurance program. The coordinator is officially the head librarian. She is responsible for the daily operation

of the library, reports to the Library Board, hires and fires personnel, does technical processing, supervises all programs, and does reference work with both students and adults. She consults with the superintendent of schools and the mayor, draws up the annual budget request for the board, and is in charge of all expenditures. She works twelve months a year, rather than nine, during which she puts in a forty hour week which may not coincide with school hours. She conducts library orientation with students beginning in the 7th grade. The library is open at 7:30 a.m. and closes at 8:00 p.m. Saturday hours are from 8:30-12:00. The library staff numbers six during the school year and seven during the summer.

The fiscal policies which support the library have functioned smoothly since their inception. While the library has a single budget, sources of money come from both the city and the school district and the Library Coordinator must keep two sets of books. The city pays building insurance, utilities, postage, copy machine service, and is responsible for a full-time temporary position (usually a returning college student) each summer. The school pays all maintenance, provides two-thirds of a travel and convention fund, provides approximately 40 percent of the money to buy books, and 100 percent of the money to buy periodicals, and is responsible for all salaries. Supplies and equipment are divided equally between the school system and the city. As it turns out, the city supplies approximately 30 percent and the school approximately 70 percent of the budget, which in 1979-80 was $72,600.

Expenditures for books are made according to a carefully detailed formula. In 1979-80, as an example, $6,800 was budgeted for book purchases, of which $3,600 came from the city and $3,200 from the school. Forty percent of the school money must be spent on high school materials, twenty

percent on junior high materials, and forty percent on elementary school materials. The money supplied by the city is divided between adult and children's collection, with 72 percent spent on the adult collection and the remaining 28 percent spent on the children's collection. Some leeway is given the coordinator within the framework of this formula, and she is allowed, in consultation with the mayor and superintendent, to alter the percentages somewhat to meet any exigencies which might arise. Additionally, the library has received money from ESEA Title IVB and LSCA collection and enrichment funds.

Much of the daily operation of the library is identical with other small libraries. In areas where the unique nature and clientele of the library has created problems, details have been worked out in a spirit of cooperation to avoid unnecessary complexities.

Some problem areas anticipated in the planning phases have simply not materialized. One such area is censorship, frequently mentioned as a significant problem when libraries of this nature are discussed. In Olney, no problem has arisen. Approximately twenty-five books considered somewhat controversial were placed on a restricted shelf and required parental permission before they could be checked out. Response to this practice ranged from parents who would not let their children read anything from this shelf, to ones who wanted their children to read everything on it. In some cases, library workers have acted as informal censors by making suggestions to younger patrons. The point is, however, that censorship has in no way been a problem in The Olney Community Library.

Another anticipated problem that never materialized was the fear that adults might be reticent to visit a library on the school campus or that mixture of school-age patrons with older patrons might be difficult.

Probably the location of the building and its architectural design have alleviated both these problems. The new building is located on one corner of the school campus. A large parking lot is adjacent to the street and one entering the library actually does not feel that s/he is going onto school grounds. Once inside the building one experiences a feeling of openness and spaciousness. The glass front which extends across the street side of the building helps create this feeling, and also turns the adult patrons' attention from the school context of the building. The children's room is one of the focal points of the building. Its extraordinary entrance, from within the building, is a multi-colored rainbow. The large, inviting room within is several different levels. In the center of the room is a pit with cushions and cubbyholes where children may curl up and read and play. Displays and book stacks are scattered about the room. This room is a medley of shapes and colors and is a place of fun as well as learning. One does not sense being in a school library. Rather, one gets the feeling of being in a library which is very busy with patrons of all ages going about their business.

Another factor of significance in creating adult willingness to use this facility is the large meeting room provided for community use. Seating forty, it is used for educational, civic, and recreational purposes by adult clubs and groups in the community. Further, careful attention was paid in the planning phases to communicate to the community exactly what was being planned. Newspaper articles, church and civic club meetings, and simple word of mouth was used to accomplish this end. Additionally, when the time came to build the new building, the carefully arranged fund-raising campaign provided contact with every citizen in town. (The $450,000 needed for construction was raised in two months.) This kind of communication both helped to create a feeling of "This is our library" and helped to communicate

the unique nature of the library. Both these factors contribute to the adult willingness to use the library.

Administratively and fiscally, then, the library has presented no insoluble problems and has, in fact, functioned smoothly. What has been the response of the community to this unique library? Statistically, there has been an almost unbelievable upsurge in circulation. In the 1974-75 school year, the first year for which circulation statistics were kept, 20,237 books were checked out from the three school and one public library. This figure jumped to 38,793 in the 1977-78 school year, and grew to 44,043 in the 1978-79 school year. The 1979-80 school year saw an increase to over 50,000. There has been a commensurate jump on holdings of books, A.V. materials, and periodicals during the same period despite heavy weeding of materials. The Olney Library has grown in both size and usage.

Evidence for a positive community response is to be found also in the willingness of civic leaders to spend more money on the library. It seems that the original intent to spend tax money more efficiently was not interpreted to mean the spending of less tax money. The budget has grown significantly each year with both school and city contributions increasing annually. In 1971, the city spent $2,519 on the public library and the school, excluding salaries, spent $4,411 on the school libraries. Salaries would have increased the school budget by another $15,000, bringing the combined total for the public and school libraries to approximately $22,000. In 1978-79, the combined budget was $46,000 and in 1979-80, when the new building was opened, that figure increased to $72,600.

The community attitude toward the library is positive. Community leaders are aware that more money is being spent on the library, but believe that the improved service is well worth it. Non-users of the library view

it as an educational tool and feel, in the words of one respondent, "Nothing is too good for our kids." People in Olney seem to be aware of the uniqueness of the library and exhibit a sense of pride in its symbolic value. Students find their library "outstanding," or "really great." They visit the library for school work as well as personal needs, and interviewees had difficulty thinking of things they did not like. School faculty was equally as positive in response. Since Olney's schools are on a single campus, movement from the three schools to the library is no great problem. Materials are adequate and teachers report more than adequate curriculum support. Those teachers who have been around since the "good old days" when students were forced to leave town to do library work are among the most vocal supporters of the library.

Among the most significant advantages which interviewees listed which this approach to library service offers were the following:

1. A unified program which makes all materials in all libraries available to the total citizenry.
2. Improved service and programs
3. Increased curriculum support
4. Considerable increase in holdings
5. Increased visibility
6. More efficient use of tax dollars
7. Reduced duplication of materials
8. Use of school facilities and materials during the summer months
9. A coordinated weeding program
10. Increased use of library services due to publicity and enthusiasm generated by the initiation of a new program

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It seems apparent that the Olney community has been unusually successful in achieving the goal of merging her school and public libraries. The success of the venture is dependent upon a number of factors. In the first place, the community engaged in careful planning combined with a slow, methodical approach. Plans were laid and solutions sought to various problems before the program was instituted. Further, the deliberate and relatively long planning phase allowed for careful communications with the community. Newspaper articles, church and civic meetings, and word of mouth were all used to apprise the community of the intentions of the program as well as the reasons behind each step toward the ultimate objective. Next, Olney is blessed with a cadre of energetic leaders who seem to place community interests above personal interests. Quality of life in Olney is a sought goal and is defined as going beyond streets, sewers, and recreational areas. Adequate city services must include also the provision of outstanding library services to the total community. Olney's leadership seems unafraid to try the innovative and untried and are effective in their efforts to do so. Further, while Olney's civic leaders sought to spend tax dollars more effectively, they were not unwilling to spend more money to accomplish desired goals. The objective in this venture was not to cut budgets or get by for less money but to squeeze the most possible service from each tax dollar spent. Moreover, the community seemed to grasp the uniqueness of the idea and to support the venture. Finally, Olney is characterized by at least three demographic factors which contribute to the success of the project: First, there is but one school campus approximately four city blocks in size on which all school buildings are situated. Second, Olney is a small community and thus has only one elementary, one junior high, and one

high school. Third, Olney is a very homogeneous community which helps to channel interests and activities into a single direction.

It is impossible to escape the conclusion that the Olney experience gives evidence of the feasibility of this approach to library service. The accessibility of information in a mass, industrial, and literate society such as ours is of utmost significance, no only in large cities but in small towns and rural areas. Business people, workers, students--in short, all citizens--need information for educational and recreational purposes. For Olney a single library that functions to meet the diverse needs of a total community seems to symbolize this unitary purpose. The community library is viewed as an educational and recreational hub around which not only the schools but the entire city as well as the surrounding countryside is woven. Thus the Olney experience, and others like it, should not be thought of merely as the merging of two existing kinds of libraries under a single roof. Rather, it is more. It is a creative effort to forge a new institution, which while it will never supplant the traditional separation of school from public libraries, will exist alongside of them. In these days of expanding information needs and shriveling tax dollars, this new approach to library service may be an idea whose time has come. For, Olney, there can be no doubt.

DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

During the course of the research, the principal investigator prepared and presented two scholarly papers. Both were entitled "Evaluation and Assessment of The Olney Community Library." One was presented in Denver in March at the annual meeting of the Association for Educational Communication Technology. The other was presented in New York in June at the American Library Association's annual meeting.

A number of articles have been written by the principal investigator to disseminate information on The Olney project. Two have been accepted and have been published. They are:

"Community Library Alive and Well in Olney, Texas," Texas Libraries 41: No. 4, Winter 1979.

"Some Libraries Do Everything Well! An Example of School/Public Library Cooperation," Top of the News 36: No. 4, Summer 1980.

Other articles have been submitted for consideration to the School Library Journal, the Library Journal, and Wilson Library Bulletin. The research report, a comprehensive report of the entire research project is now being printed and will be available for circulation in October or November, 1980.